Bellevue Literary Review

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Cover Note: *OPD Pediatrics Clinic, 1960s*
Bellevue's Outpatient Department (OPD) was housed in a massive brick building, erected c.1910. Design of the building was based on the Florence Nightingale Plan, stipulating large windows and high ceilings to maximize fresh air flow to prevent disease. A consequence was abundant natural light, a boon to photographers. The OPD was always busy; signs were in seven languages, reflecting diversity of the patients. Then, as now, children in the OPD were routinely seen by residents on rotation who were supervised by attending physicians. By 1973, all outpatient services were relocated to the new Bellevue Hospital tower. The OPD was razed in 1975, and replaced by the garden that now graces the hospital entrance.

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A Staircase in the Fog

Robin Fast

1

I suddenly felt that it really made no difference to me whether or not the world existed.

Snow began falling at daybreak, and through the darkness of December, it came down with the force of something true. Drifts banked the windowpanes before it let up, hollows in the backyard leveled, and the ridge top above us faded like smoke. When the storm petered out at noon, my home lay steeping in fog—the ground-hugging inversion of smoke and vapor that usually follows snow in this inland valley. East of the Cascade Range, fog is the hair shirt of winter, our lives inside it abraded by caffeine spurts and restless sleep.

Beneath this rag-and-bone sky, the only shadow cast is memory. It was wintertime thirty-five years ago when I learned that family afflictions, like weather, come at you from beyond. Fog diffuses the landscape now as if to invoke my father's story, a vanishing as strange and as easy to believe as the snow that smothers the ground. From habit more than hope, I step outside, strapping on snowshoes, and follow a deer path toward Manastash Ridge, a vast tract of state land whose borders stem the reach of newly built housing. If you walk its trails in the fog, you can imagine yourself in a wilderness, or in my case, on a road unspooled from the past. Quail scatter before me into thickets of dog rose. Coyote tracks pock the snow, my own crosshatched ovals blunting their steps.

2

To say nothing of the possibility that indeed there wouldn't be anyone or anything left after me, and as my consciousness sputtered out, the whole world would vanish like a phantom, like a mere figment of that consciousness of mine. For it is possible that all the world and all the people are nothing but me.

In December 1966, when my father was thirty-five and I was eight years old, he climbed the attic staircase of our family house, stretched himself on the floor, and drifted into a catatonic stupor. My mother found him there when her nursery school job let out. Thinking her husband dead at first, she coaxed from him a few monosyllables, telephoned his psychiatrist, and began what must have been an appalling vigil. Among the attic's shapes and drafts she set meal trays, a chamber pot. This was the place she lured us kids away from while Daddy was "traveling on business." For three days he lay there watching dust motes settle. If he listened, he probably could hear mice gnaw at the plaster. Voices would

have found him through the ductwork; thuds and sighs, television, and food rumors must have invaded his sanctuary. Over the course of those days we lost my father; after he emerged we were never again able to reach him.

If there is a foreshadowing of a crackup like his, children are unequipped to read the signs. Much later I learned that more than a year before he sought the attic, Dad had resigned his university job, following it with a string of public school positions. The last was at a junior high from which he went AWOL, escaping with his bag lunches to the library of a nearby town. To cover his tracks, he made withdrawals from the family savings account and deposited the funds into checking. By the time his principal caught up with my mother, Dad was past pretending. He loaded our Volkswagen bus with heirlooms, drove twelve miles to the city, parked on a downtown thoroughfare, with doors unlocked, keys dangling from the ignition, and walked away. After a series of rides by trolley and bus, my father arrived home and climbed to the top of our house. Three days later he entered a state asylum.

3

And then, before eleven, the rain stopped and was replaced by a monstrous dampness that was even damper and colder than the rain had been. A strange steam billowed from every object, from every stone . . . .

For thirty-five years these events have yielded their aftermath. It might be the weather recalling them now. Fog obliterates Manastash Ridge, transforming the sharp outlines of pine and bitterbrush to dream shapes seen through bottle glass. Reference points elude me on the slope I'm climbing. Fog is the fraught sleep of winter in the inland Northwest, stifling our valley between Halloween and February with the weight of enforced penance. Fog ties up the county crisis line, raises the highway death toll, entombs the solstice. To keep oneself upright in fog season takes a certain vigilance. I've been going on walks and reading Dickens's *Bleak House*, whose murals of busy madness and grim weather lead the reader through a London "gone into mourning…for the death of the sun," a universe lobotomized by fog. In *Bleak House* the mist collects most thickly near Chancery, a law court where officials perfect the practices of obscurity, endlessly prolonging inheritance disputes and bankrupting litigants. Nutty Miss Flite, veteran of a fifty-year case, has named her pet songbirds "Waste," "Folly," and "Ruin" in honor of the court. Everyone seeking justice at Chancery goes mad in the end: old Krook, though reduced to rag picking, believes he is London's Lord High Chancellor and dies of spontaneous combustion.

Drama is the oxygen of literature; memoir makes do with everyday facts. My father was narrow in build and worldview, a consummate nerd, really, but one whose mild features betrayed a priggish and temperamental spirit. Dad was

an "idealist," our mother said. Allowances were made to contour family life to his moods. He might hold forth over the dinner table, correcting manners in Latinate diction—"Be so good as to masticate inaudibly"—but if a child's remark or some betrayal of atmosphere upset him, he would swallow himself with the instinct of a box turtle. Unmoving but for a tic in his jaw, my father would absent himself from human company.

Still, compared with his public mask, the domestic face was almost reassuring. Self-consciousness condemned my father to agonies. He grew meek and wooden or painfully forced in company, especially among women. He pretended not to have heard when spoken to so he wouldn't have to respond. Other than rare martinis, nothing much made him laugh, and innocent questions about himself were anathema. The son of a stern careerist and a melancholic immigrant, he lost his mother to an overdose of pills before his fourteenth birthday. Dad was always prone to withdrawal, it seems, but inclination turned to habit when my grandfather married his housekeeper six months after the first wife's suicide. A family letter dated from 1947 refers to my father's reluctance to "get acquainted with other young people."

Many years of his life my sisters and I cannot account for. Miraculously, he graduated from an Ivy League school, courted my mother, and completed most of a doctorate before depression closed in. He was supporting three kids when he began to resign his jobs. I remember, as a five-year-old, a figure of awe—the giant behind the newspaper—but also the vague outlines of a man who willed himself invisible. Children crave their parents' love, and so throughout the years he went missing, I believed my father would return for us. The lesson he offered instead was that intimacy has no place.

I have had to piece together my father's career on the basis of scarce information. Relatives downplay the subject. When we do discuss it, we disagree about particulars. "Speak, memory," we say, but who can authorize the telling? When the principle player disclosed nothing, I found informants in textbooks. My father's illness, I have learned, is attributable to major depression and bipolar disorder in combination with "schizoid tendencies." On the problem of diagnosis, the nineteenth-century psychiatrist Heinrich Neumann wrote, "There is only one kind of mental disorder; we call it insanity."

Whatever my father was when my sisters and I were young, he was unwell—apathetic, self-absorbed, paranoid, sometimes erratic. During one episode, including work under floodlights, he scraped and painted our three-story house within a week. But mostly he signed himself into hospitals, bedeviled by back ailments and mysterious skin complaints. He drove the VW to distant towns and passed long hours huddled in library stacks. He haunted movie theaters. Later, during the years following his breakdown, obsessions took hold. He once sued

my mother—who had divorced him—for withholding a box of his grade-school report cards (which she claimed didn't exist.) He wrote to me at college, insisting we meet to discuss "critical matters," then didn't show up. Nothing ever came of his campaigns involving lawyers and conducted through registered mail, but 200 years ago his behavior might have earned him a pallet in a workhouse. Dickens's novels harrow the imagination with their images of treadmills paced by consumptive inmates, of soot falling from rectangles of sky. Yet despite the misery of workhouses, which threw the mentally ill together with criminals and paupers, these places were preferable to other options. During the Middle Ages, the insane were often packed aboard a "ship of fools" to drift along the waterways of Europe, vagrant and abused. During the Reformation many were burned as witches. As recently as 1900, one attraction at a psychiatric conference included a catatonic woman exhibited on stage with her physician. At the climax of his lecture, the doctor stuck pins into his patient to show that she displayed no feelings.

Treatments introduced during the 1930s included brain incisions and insulin-coma therapy. Electroshock therapy followed, along with many forms of talk therapy, from Freudian analysis to behavior modification. These offered scant relief to deeply afflicted patients. Today's crazies are merely homeless, some cities having revived the logic of the fools' ship by confining street people to the seediest parts of town.

My father never walked the streets. Researchers have progressed in mapping dysphoria, locating underproduction of serotonin as the most frequent cause. By reading neurochemistry as the Braille of character we agree, in principle at least, that the mentally ill deserve some degree of kindness in a rational society. Less yielding to reason are the afflictions of the relatives in stricken families.

4

I gave myself over entirely to dreaming—dreaming away for three months on end, huddled in my corner. And believe me, in my dreams, I had nothing in common with the fellow . . . .

Midwinter, an hour ahead of dusk, is a searching time. As I climb through thinning fog I cross a set of raccoon tracks, or maybe porcupine. The dark shape of an owl blurs past. Unlike the animals, I can depend on dinner. My hunger is emotional, and is only growing when I notice that the sky overhead has thinned to a deep indigo. At 3500 feet, I quicken my pace, hoping to glimpse the sun.

As children of the mentally ill, how can we know whether the tracks we leave will resemble our parents'? According to Peter A. Magaro in his book, *The Construction of Madness*, such people run twelve times the normal risk of developing mental illness themselves. And one half of all gene carriers who remain undebilitated will still show "peculiarities of behavior and cognition."

(This I suspected during adolescence when, assuming that a fatherless boy would turn out gay, relatives chipped in to send me to boarding school.) But evidence going the other way has also come to light. A researcher named L.L. Heston argues that asymptomatic children of schizophrenics are disproportionately "colorful" and "spontaneous," people given to vocations in the arts.

What, I used to wonder, could I expect from the future? Depressives' kids must in some ways learn to invent themselves, but for the better part of our lives, my sisters and I have pondered the spores our father left behind. At fourteen I dreaded some cataclysm such as he had witnessed in his mother's death. At the same time, being as fond of concealment as he, I lied to neighborhood kids about my dad's achievements. Though far from home, he was cutting a swath in the world, writing treatises and closing deals. Later, throughout my twenties, I expected failure. If Dad couldn't handle a career, how would I fare? I supposed that my watershed would begin around age thirty-five, when I would face the darkness that had swallowed him before me.

Because the man was a rare and enigmatic presence in our lives, appearing for graduations and holidays, we kids referred to him in code: the remote and wincingly uptight Egyptian Sphinx; the Sperm Donor; the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. "I got sphinxed!" my sister Kara would say after he stood her up for a dinner date. Any time he succumbed to nerves and didn't show—or bungled directions or whatever he did—this was our excuse for black humor. The fact is, though, I didn't *feel* jocular discussing "Papa's Cuckoo Clock." Acceptance was far from my thoughts. His so-called recovery during the 1980s was due to the new medications, I suppose, though at best they allowed him to become, in Kara's words, "functionally strange." Isolated from contacts, he held a string of menial jobs until an accident forced his retirement. He finally exiled himself to northern Idaho.

Middle-aged now, I have begrudged my father his illness for so long, I am weary of my own resentment. I am sorry for the pain we incommunicably share. But years of trial have brought me no closer to a missing parent's embrace. The best way out of Chancery, Dickens showed, is to dismiss the court. By the end of *Bleak House*, the only party to a Chancery suit who keeps his mind is the avuncular John—he alone realizes that life is elsewhere. As for me, I could not recover my father, but I have become a father, myself.

5

Now I'm living my life out in a corner, trying to console myself with the stupid, useless excuse that an intelligent man cannot turn himself into anything, that only a fool can make anything he wants of himself.

Twilight. I am standing upright on level ground at last, watching the sun's alpenglow on a distant snowfield of Mt. Stuart. Like an arctic seal at its breathing hole, I have emerged from darkness to gulp the air of a higher altitude. Though the fog lies thickly below, streaks of fuchsia band the west beyond Rainier. There will be stars above the ridge tonight.

When my father took the attic stairs, he entered a fog that no one else could see. To follow a man like him has been a bewildering climb, a shaking off of sleep. I have learned to believe in human limitations—there is no denying their reach—and yet all this time I've been bound to discover that in the cold, you have to keep moving. ꩜

Italicized passages quoted from Notes from Underground by Fyodor Dostoevsky (translated by Constance Garnett).